

“Nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt”

Christ’s words in Gethsemane are echoed in Leonard Cohen’s beautiful song of reflection, *“If it be your will”*. The challenge of our lives in faith is to find our truth in God’s truth but that means some serious thinking about the will of God for our humanity. The very rich, suggestive, and profound readings set before us on this *The Second Sunday in Lent* provide us with such an opportunity.

But first, let me thank your rector, the Revd Dr. Paul Friesen, and the Parish of St. Paul’s for the kindness and the privilege, the pleasure and the honour of preaching tonight and for hosting the Prayer Book Society of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. The work of the Society has been primarily about reclaiming our fundamental spiritual identity as Anglican Christians embodied in the Prayer Book tradition of theology and spirituality. It is especially an honour to be here at St. Paul’s, Halifax, because of the significant role St. Paul’s plays in the history and life of the Diocese and beyond. It was, to take one small but important example, the St. Paul’s Mite Society which contributed to the building and support of many of our rural parishes, particularly along the Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia. That kind of outreach and commitment to the Gospel was altogether crucial for the life of the Church in the remoter parts of the province. Having served for a number of years in such parishes and churches assisted by the St. Paul’s Mite Society, this gives me an opportunity to say thank you.

The Scripture readings that are before us this evening and as well at the Eucharist speak wonderfully to our current distresses and anxieties. We live in a broken world. One of the recurring refrains of the Lenten season is that we are the community of the broken-hearted. To know that is the condition of our turning back to God. *“A broken and a contrite heart thou wilt not despise”*, as the Psalmist, perhaps David himself, puts it. *“Rend your heart and not your garments”*, the prophet Joel tells us, *“and turn unto the Lord your God.”* The season of Lent reminds us of a basic biblical insight expressed in the Collect. *“We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves”*. But far from leading to a kind of paralysis and helplessness, it moves us to repentance which is about our turning to God and with great insistence. Nowhere is that great insistence seen more clearly than in the Eucharistic Gospel story of the *“woman of Canaan”* who engages so wonderfully and yet so disturbingly with Jesus, seeking mercy from him as Lord for her daughter who is *“grievously vexed with a devil”*.

It is an amazing scene. She is clearly a non-Israelite who senses in Jesus the truth and power of God who alone can heal and restore. Her importunity results in her breaking into the heart of Jesus but only so because he wills to have her faith drawn out so explicitly. Spiritual life is about a struggle, a jihad of the soul, a wrestling with God, like Jacob wrestling with God and becoming Israel. The story reveals the tension between Israel and the whole of our humanity. Is God just the God of Israel or indeed the God for all people? And if so, what does that mean for the particular cultures and communities in which we live? At issue is the relation between the universal and the

particular which is a dynamic feature of the very nature of revelation itself. God reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush first by way of a particular tribal identity, "*the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*", and then universally as "*I am Who I am*". That necessary tension between the particular and the universal carries over into the Christian understanding concentrated in the figure of Jesus Christ.

In a way, the encounter between the "*woman of Canaan*", as Matthew styles her, and Jesus, highlights this tension and resolves it. She has an insight into the universality of God's truth in Jesus through the particularity of his Jewish identity. Jesus both confirms this and transcends it but without forsaking it. "*I am not send but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel*", he says but that does not deter her. "*Lord, help me*", she says. "*It is not right to take the children's bread,*" a reference to the children of Israel, he says, "*and to cast it dogs*", a reference to the sense of otherness between Israel and what is outside Israel. Her response is at once a kind of turning point and a breakthrough moment. "*Truth, Lord, yet the little dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table*". Not just dogs but "*little dogs*" and with a claim to the Lord of all creation! This is what the encounter intends to draw out. To know that "*we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves*" leads not to mere passivity but to prayer, to the active seeking of the will of God without which there can be no turning, no healing. She is the non-Israelite who wrestles with God in Christ as a true Israelite. Such is the struggle, "*if it be your will*".

"*Repentance itself*", the great Anglican preacher, Lancelot Andrewes notes, echoing the prophet Joel, "*is nothing else but redire ad principia, 'a kind of circling', to return to him by repentance from Whom by sin we have turned away.*"¹ And it is here, perhaps, that we can begin to grasp something of the deep lessons from *Genesis* and *Mark* with the foundational stories of the Flood and the Tower of Babel seen in conjunction with the Passion of Christ in Gethsemane.

We don't, I fear, attend seriously enough to these Old Testament stories and often miss how they inform so much of the New Testament. To have the end of the story of the Flood along with the story of the Tower of Babel is quite instructive. Both stories reveal the great biblical insight that the human community has no unity and no truth apart from God. Why the flood to begin with? Because of the sin and violence of our humanity. The problem is with us, with our chaos and disorder. This stands, by the way, in complete contrast to the much older flood story in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* which occurs because the Gods are annoyed and indifferent to humankind and decide, though not unanimously, for the Gods can't get their act together either, to wipe them off the face of the earth altogether, only to find themselves threatened by the very forces they have unleashed. That story reveals a world where the forces of chaos seem more powerful than the forces of order; there is, at least, a great uncertainty about the world itself and thus a great fearfulness. There is the further irony that the Gods are annoyed at the "babble" of the humans.

¹ Lancelot Andrewes, Ash Wednesday Sermon, 1619

The *Genesis* story is very much about God cleaning up the human mess and establishing the idea of law, hence the covenant with Noah symbolised in the sign of the rainbow, as we heard tonight, and also in the recalling of an essential feature of our humanity from the accounts of creation. “*God made man in his own image*” and because of that there is the proscription against murder. There is a new and different relation to God, to man, and to nature signalled in the conclusion to the story of Noah and the Flood.

We confront our human wickedness when we are left to our own devices. Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, notes about the biblical flood story that what occasions the flood is the problem of “*identity without universality*”, the universality of law for all.² Violence arises out of the conflicts between one another, between them and us, because of our tribal identities to which we cling in opposition to one another. As Sacks suggests, this biblical picture has its modern echo in Thomas Hobbes’ famous account of man in the hypothetical state of nature as being the war of “*every man against every man*” and where there was “*continual fear, and danger of violent death.*” For “*where there is no overarching rule of law, the world is filled with violence,*” Sacks remarks, an echo perhaps of Dostoyevsky’s observation that “*without God... all things are permitted ... [and] they – mankind – can do what they like*”.³ That is, of course, the problem.

This is the significance of the covenant with Noah, a covenant which calls us to account, to a law for all and to the strong reminder of our common humanity as made in the image of God himself. It arises out of the pageant of violence that begins with the Fall leading to the story of Cain and Abel and carrying right through to the Flood. “*The earth was corrupt before God, the earth was filled with violence*”. The Flood cleanses and restores the created order and establishes a covenant between God and his creation. We are held to account and led into the beginnings of a deeper understanding of the goodness and truth of God which is always greater than our misuse and abuse of ourselves and creation. We are turned to God.

But what then are we to make of the story of the Tower of Babel? It is the opposite problem from the flood. It is about “*universality without identity*” (Sacks). It seems at first so positive and good, the idea of a common human enterprise, yet it is really the story of human presumption which leads to oppression and to the imposition of tyrannical order at the expense of human freedom. We tend to read it as a just-so story about the division of the world into many languages not noticing that this implies something negative about the diversity of languages and cultures. But in the previous chapter, the origins of linguistic diversity have already been established positively with the division of humanity into seventy nations “*each with its own language.*” The problem with the Tower of Babel is that it belongs to the suppression of cultural and linguistic identities

² Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, (New York, Schocken Books, 2015), p. 191. Subsequent references are found in pp. 190-193.

³ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamasov*, (Middlesex, England, Penguin Classics, trans. David Magarshack, 1958), Book Eleven, ‘*A Hymn and A Secret*’, p. 691. See also Book Five, ‘*The Grand Inquisitor*’, p. 309.

by imposing one language, one culture, one way of thinking and doing things upon all others, an early form of globalisation, one might say, but at the expense of what is true and truly to be honoured in each other in and through the particularities of place.

As Sacks again notes, the story imitates the practice of the world's first empires, citing the examples of the neo-Assyrians, Ashurbanipal II and Sargon II, who made the diverse cultures and languages under their reign all "*speak one speech.*" Thus, the problem with the Tower of Babel lies in the human attempt to achieve unity and order on our own strength and power. The phrase "*come let us build ourselves a city and a tower ... lest we be scattered over the face of the earth*" is complemented by the phrase of the Egyptian Pharaoh about controlling the Hebrews, "*come let us deal wisely with them, lest they increase*". These are the only times in the Hebrew scriptures that the construct "*come let us ... lest*" is used. The Tower of Babel denies the forms of our identities in and through the particular contexts and cultures that belong to human life. It is about subjugation. It is about "*order without freedom,*" the attempt to make the other like us.

Pentecost reverses the story of the tower of Babel. By the descent of the Holy Spirit, unity is accomplished in and through but not in spite of the diversities of languages. "*We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.*" But that is only possible because of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ which overcomes our separation from God and from one another. All the Lenten readings anticipate the Passion of Christ and signal our participation in it. *The Book of Common Prayer* provides the older practice, now largely jettisoned in our churches, of immersing ourselves in all four Gospel accounts of the Passion in Holy Week beginning with *Matthew* on Palm Sunday, *Mark* on Monday and Tuesday, *Luke* on Wednesday and Thursday, and *John* on Good Friday.

During Lent the accounts of *The Passion According to Mark* and *Luke* are also read in alternating years on the Lenten Sunday evenings. These patterns and practices are altogether about a serious engagement with the will of God for our humanity in the light of our own brokenness that arises from sin and presumption in denying the truth and goodness of God. Christ's agony in Gethsemane reveals the nature of the struggle. It is a most intense scene that follows the last supper and leads into the events of the crucifixion, to Judas' kiss of betrayal, Christ's capture, trial, scourging and crucifixion.

Gethsemane signals the meaning of the Passion, the struggle for the will of God in the face of human wickedness and confusion. The human struggle is brought into the divine relation of the Father and the Son. It is a real struggle, not some form of play-acting. "*Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee,*" Jesus says, a true and important insight about the nature of God. "*Take away this cup from me*", he prays, for suffering is not something to be sought for and wanted. "*Nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt,*" he concludes. Therein lies the lesson, the yielding of ourselves to the will of God in the knowledge of God's goodness and truth, not the presumption of our own self-sufficiency. The struggle of the woman of Canaan belongs to the agony of Gethsemane.

It shapes and informs the struggle of our lives in faith. It is about the truth of our longing for the will of God. *"Thy will be done."*

Leonard Cohen's song, *"If it be your will"*, tentative and conditional as it is and as such not unlike Christ's agony in Gethsemane, registers the longing and hesitancy of our contemporary world. It seems we want something but are afraid to commit, uncertain in our certainties about the world which we have made. Perhaps we are beginning to long for that will of God for us.

"If it be your will/ That I speak no more/ And my voice be still/ As it was before/ I will speak no more/ I shall abide until/ I am spoken for/ If it be your will." But even more than this hesitancy to speak, there is the idea of a voice that is true and one which sings *"from this broken hill"*. *"If it be your will/ That a voice be true/ From this broken hill/ I will sing to you/ From this broken hill/ All your praises they shall ring."* Forgive me for sensing in this something of the voice of the Psalms and the Prophets, something of Mary's response at the Annunciation, and something, too, of the story of Christ in Gethsemane and on the broken hill of Calvary. Something, too, of what it means to be the Church. *"If it be your will"*.

"If it be your will/ To let me sing/ If it be your will/ If there is a choice/ Let the rivers fill/ Let the hills rejoice/ Let your mercy spill/ on all..." It is a prayer that signals like all prayer the hopes of our humanity for ourselves and for creation which can only be found in God. In our broken-hearts, we turn to God seeking in his Word his will for us.

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Choral Evensong at St. Paul's, Halifax
PBSC NSPEI
March 12th, 2017
Second Sunday in Lent*